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AUTHOR Obermiller, Phillip J.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Lower Price Hill Community School, located in a low-income neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio, suggesting that the school's history and operation offer practical steps for improving education for Appalachian people. Conditions faced by urban Appalachians, many of whom migrated to cities following World War II are described and it is argued that urban Appalachians have been poorly served by public schools, where they face ethnic and class discrimination. Lower Price Hill, a heavily Appalachian neighborhood of 2,155 residents, has had one of the highest dropout rates in Cincinnati. Concerned about their education problems, area residents in 1972 formed the community school, housing it in a church basement. Originally staffed by volunteers, classes were voluntary, with a homelike atmosphere. Today, the one-room school covers the top floor of a former parochial school building and offers some 250 students high school equivalency (GED) courses, basic literacy, or a two-year college program. Students are low-income, but intelligent and highly motivated, with a sense of control that reinforces their ideas of community power and autonomy. The school also serves a social function as an informal drop-in center and a site for community meals. It also is seen as an agent for social change, cooperating with advocacy organizations to win reform in the state's GED procedures. The school challenges many ideas held by public school officials, and constitutes a radical experiment for urban Appalachians. A reference list is included. (TES)

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THE LOWER PRICE HILL COMMUNITY SCHOOL:

STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE FROM AN APPALACHIAN STREET ACADEMY

Phillip J. Obermiller, Northern Kentucky University[1]
Kathryn M. Borman, University of Cincinnati
James A. Kroger, Lower Price Hill Community School

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The chronic lack of educational resources coupled with high rates of functional illiteracy and dropping out in many Appalachian counties are well documented realities of life in the region (Appalachian Center, 1985a; 1985b). Less well known but just as devastating is the educational deprivation faced by Appalachians who have migrated to urban areas outside the region (Borman and Muenninghoff, 1983; Berlowitz and Durand, 1977; Wagner, 1973, 1975, & 1977). Our intent in this paper, however, is not simply to describe a deplorable situation, nor is it to propose an all-encompassing solution to the problem. This presentation focuses on the middle ground between the frustration of "ain't it awful" and the smugness of "this is the answer." That ground is occupied by an Appalachian street academy located in a low-income neighborhood on Cincinnati's near west side. The Lower Price Hill Community School is a case study of some practical steps toward achieving modest improvements in educational opportunities for Appalachians.

We will begin with a description of the objective conditions faced by urban Appalachians with particular reference to educational outcomes, followed by an outline of the philosophical and functional background of the Lower Price Hill Community School. We will conclude with an assessment of the school's achievements both on behalf of individuals and in changing the structures that affect educational attainment at the local and state levels. It is our assumption throughout this paper that,

although we speak of a specific school in a particular urban setting, our findings have implications for educational polilcies in both the rural and the urban areas that Appalachians call home.

URBAN APPALACHIANS

The great migration of the post-war era brought many Appalachians to urban areas outside the region where they live today with their children and grandchildren. In the Cincinnati metropolitan area first and second generation Appalachian migrants compose about one quarter of the population. They show no differences from the general population in demographic characteristics such as age and sex distributions. As a result of high mobility rates within the general population and the historical peak-time of the Appalachian migration (1955 -60), Appalachians have, on average, lived in the Cincinnati area approximately the same number of years as non-Appalachians. But on the key indicators of income, educational attainment, and occupational status, Appalachians form a distinct middle group between non-Appalachian whites who enjoy high socioeconomic status, and blacks who have very low status on each of these three indicators (Obermiller, 1987).

To say that Appalachians are poorly served by urban public schools is an understatement. Ethnographic studies of teaching and learning in urban primary and secondary schools have documented the biases of social class and ethnicity faced by

urban Appalachian students. These biases are manifest in such routine practices as grouping children for instruction in reading and mathematics, segregating them by perceived ability, retaining students in grade, and administering ritalin to young children labeled as hyperactive. In a study of literacy learning in first grade classrooms in Columbus, Ohio, researchers note that:

> All males from the Appalachian culture who were in the first grade (five classrooms) of the school were repeaters save two students who were daily taking behavior modification medicine. Therefore, it was necessary to select as a subject from the Appalachian culture a child who was repeating the first grade. The selected child's retention had been attributed to prolonged absence during the school year (DeStefano, Pepinsky and Sanders, 1982).

Such practices as grouping and retention in grade have long term effects on student careers. Data for the Cincinnati public schools in 1986 revealed that failure rates were highest for students in the general curriculum track where 30 to 35 percent of all enrolled students failed classes, compared with 15 to 23 percent of those enrolled in academic track classes. In addition, the typical general track student took five and a half years to complete four years of high school by being retained in grade.

For Appalachian students in Cincinnati's public schools, these practices translate into an intolerable academic environment. Of the ten neighborhoods in Cincinnati with the highest dropout

rates, eight are predominantly Appalachian. The average dropout rate for these neighborhoods in 1980 was 44.9 percent. By comparison, the Appalachian counties of Eastern Kentucky had an average 1980 dropout rate of 30.9 percent (Maloney and Borman, 1987).

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Lower Price Hill, with 2,155 residents, is a heavily Appalachian neighborhoods it ranked fifth from the bottom in overall socioeconomic status in 1980 when nearly half its eligible population was jobless or out of the labor force. In 1980 average family income in the neighborhood was little over half that of the city-wide average. Over one in five neighborhood residents over the age of twenty-five lack a high school diploma. With 58 percent of its youth between the ages of 16 and 19 out of school, Lower Price Hill has the second highest dropout rate in the city (Borman and Spring, 1984; Maloney and Borman, 1987).

THE SCHOOL

The Lower Price Hill Community School was founded in 1972 by residents of the neighborhood concerned about the high rates of illiteracy and school dropouts in their families and community. Staffed by Mennonite volunteers, classes were held in a windowless basement room donated by a local church. Students attended voluntarily, encouraged by the familiar atmosphere of kitchen tables each with its own tablecloth and lamp. In keeping

with the homelike atmosphere, the students could eat, drink pop, or smoke while they studied. Attendance was recognized and encouraged but never taken.

The residents who organized the school became its first board members as they drew up a set of bylaws and incorporated the school to ensure its long-term viability. No tuition was charged and the school operated with volunteer teachers, donations, and the occasional rummage sale. Since 1972 the school has enrolled over 2,500 learners and has had over 200 students earn their high school equivalency diploma (GED).

Today the Lower Price Hill Community School is still a one-room school, but the light, airy classroom covers the entire top floor of a former parochial school building located in the center of the neighborhood. In addition to the high school equivalency and basic literacy programs, the school has a two-year college program offered as a satellite project of a local university. In a typical year the school serves 250 students, thirty-five of whom are in the college program, and graduates an average of twenty students with the GED diploma.

Although their reading and math skills are well below the grade levels they attained before dropping out, learners at the community school are intelligent and highly motivated. Some are young mothers, some are women who have raised their families, others are young men seeking basic academic skills, others are older people seeking the rewards of literacy. Regardless of their reasons for attending, most students show a marked

improvement in both self confidence and basic learning skills as they attend the Community School.

Neighborhood residents still hold a majority of the board seats, but over time graduates of the school have replaced its founders on the board. The board now oversees the work of a faculty that includes a full-time teacher/coordinator, a full-time teacher/tutor, four instructors from the university, and a fluctuating group of part-time and volunteer teachers who offer tutoring or classes of special interest to the neighborhood. Board members in concert with the school's teacher/coordinator are responsible for raising about $75,000 annually. These funds are raised from scratch each year through a city-wide and regional development drive. The school operates on a pay-as-you-go basis, laying off staff or curtailing programs in response to budget shortfalls. A constant concern for the budget notwithstanding, funding or assistance which threatens the school's autonomy is consistently avoided.

Despite its growth over the years, the school has developed no bureaucracy, borrowing or purchasing its secretarial, copying and printing, and phone answering services from a social welfare agency located in the same building. Board and staff recognize that bureaucratic arrangements have a chilling effect on the personal relationships that are essential to maintaining the instructional milieu of the school. Thus, those involved with the school constantly struggle to maintain a relatively "flat" authority structure.

Although teaching and testing techniques are quite up-to-date, learning at the school remains a comfortable and relaxed experience. Informal meals are frequently prepared and served from a kitchen in one corner of the classroom. Small groups of students drinking pop and studying at cloth covered tables is still the norm, although smoking is now relegated to a special area. Teachers move among the students quietly offering advice or responding to questions. Students are known by name and by family, since kinship patterns are on of the key facets of social organization in the neighborhood (Borman, Mueninghoff, and Piazza, forthcoming).

MOVING TOWARD SOCIAL CHANGE

The school performs three interrelated functions for its primarily Appalachian constituency. It serves as an education center, a social hub, and a social change agent. Although these functions overlap in practice, we will discuss them in succession for the sake of clarity.

That the school effectively and efficiently meets the educational needs of its constituency is clearly demonstrated by the satisfaction expressed by its current students, by the number of students who have passed the statewide GED examination, and by those students who go on to the college program. Census data reinforce these perceptions; between 1970 and 1980 the percentage of Lower Price Hill residents over the age of twenty-five with

high school diplomas rose from 15.1 to 23.3 (Maloney and Borman, 1987).

The school's success in attracting and serving students is a result of neighborhood residents' determination, the staff's dedication, and the students' drive to obtain an education. These strong motivational factors are combined with highly effective teaching methods which take into account the learners' social and cultural backgrounds. These methods include an understanding and respect for the students' cultural heritage, personalized recruiting and teaching techniques, a comfortable and friendly classroom atmosphere, an emphasis on meeting the individual's academic needs through individualized learning strategies, and a sense of accomplishment reinforced by high GED scores and the opportunity to attend college.

A key point here is that the school does not objectify Appalachian culture; no effort is made to teach about Appalachia as such. Rather, a subtle understanding of what it means to be Appalachian infuses everything done at the school. It is a subject freely spoken about but not artificially inserted in the learning process. Appalachian consciousness grows among the students along with their understanding of grammar and their ability in math.

Another important aspect of the school is the students sense of control. One observer puts it this way:

> One benefit [of the school] is that the situation has been pre-screened. Students are not forced to arrive in an

> unknown situation; they already have an idea of what it is like, and most importantly, they know from someone they know well. Another benefit is that the decision to attend is a decision made among friends rather than a verdict handed down to them. In other words, they control whether or not they will go and how often. The control is perceived to be very important to the students (McCarthy, 1983:127).

This self-motivated attendance speaks well of both the school and the learners who use it. Perhaps more importantly, it reinforces with the students ideas of community power and the local control of institutions.

A second function of the school is to provide some of the basic social opportunities lacking in the neighborhood. It is an informal drop-in center where everyone is seen as a potential learner, whether or not they choose to participate at the study tables. It is the site of cooking and nutrition classes and frequent community meals. The women students who use the school's child care service are encouraged to participate in a local program for mothers and infants; young men from the neighborhood gather at the school weekly to cook supper. The teachers often engage in informal counseling, and work closely with the professional staff of Santa Maria Neighborhood House, a Community Chest sponsored social welfare agency, to aid students in acquiring appropriate assistance for their problems.

The school's role as a social hub reflects the students' view of their lives as a web of interconnected concerns and

responsibilities. Neighborhood life is not easily divided into separate categories of public and personal issues. The school makes learning more accessible by integrating it with meals, child care, and opportunities to relax, socialize, and discuss mutual concerns. This is a logical extension of the homelike physical environment the school cultivates.

The third function of the school, inducing social change, flows from its roles as educational center and social hub. The board and staff of the school work closely with Appalachian advocacy organizations such as the Urban Appalachian Council and the urban unit of the Appalachian Peoples Service Organization. In alliance with these organizations the school fought for and won basic changes in the State of Ohio's cumbersome procedures for issuing GED certificates. This same coalition is currently campaigning to reduce the fees levied by the state for taking the GED examinations.

While the school supports the legal battles fought by Cincinnati's black community to end segregation in the Cincinnati public schools, it has taken a different tack in response to the high dropout rates among Appalachians in the public school system. Put very simply, the Lower Price Hill Community School is an embarrassment and challenge to the Cincinnati Public School System. The very existence of the school attests to the difficulty Appalachians experience in obtaining an education in urban public schools, and by extension in rural schools as well. Moreover, it stands as a powerful refutation of the belief held

by some public school officials who maintain that there is an historical disdain for schooling among Appalachian people.

The Community School's vivid demonstration that Appalachians want and will use effective educational programs challenges the assumptions behind the word "dropout" and introduces the more accurate concept of "pushout" to the public discourse on this issue (cf. Berlowitz and Durand, 1977). The Lower Price Hill Community School is a small but critical voice urging the public schools to drop their victim-blaming stance and to introduce effective means of educating minority students.

In addition to deconstructing myths about Appalachians, the school serves as a model for deinstituitionalizing public education. Its minimal bureaucracy and abiding independence are key elements in the school's efficiency and effectiveness. Local control of the school develops the leadership abilities of the neighborhood residents and school graduates serving on the board. Further, the school has served as a model for similar efforts in other communities: to date, it has been replicated in seven other Cincinnati neighborhoods. This small network of community schools provides an example of how decentralized education might work on a larger scale.

The social dimension of the school provides a focal point in the community where residents can not only gain academic skills, but also grow in political awareness. In this sense the school is

the medium through which students and other neighborhood residents can become conscious of a common heritage, develop a sense of common issues and concerns, and begin to think together about appropriate responses to these shared experiences.

The overall impact of the Community School is difficult to quantify and perhaps all too easy to overstate for those who are involved with it. Nonetheless, the school cannot but help affect future generations of urban Appalachians through its daily service to the parents of those generations. The first graduates of the two-year college program are now pursuing degrees in education and social work at local universities. They will soon add their skills to the struggle for change in the neighborhood and in the schools.

As a social change agent the Lower Price Hill Community School serves as a criticism of broad educational policies, a challenge to the local educational bureaucracy, and a means of raising the abilities and consciousness of its students. It is not an unambiguous success in any of these areas, but however modest its scope, it is a significant departure from the practices and policies of the public schools. As such, it constitutes a radical experiment for urban Appalachians.

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